

*Gifts to the Prairie.*



**The Work of Pioneer Nurserymen  
and the Art of the Prestele Family**

Daryl Watson



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and the Art of the Prestele Family

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## Preface

**G**ifts to the Prairie accompanies the exhibit of the same name, which was mounted in the Helen Alexander Bender Gallery at the McLean County Museum of History from April 14, 2008 to November 3, 2008. The exhibit tells the story of the production nurserymen's prints which were among the finest created in 19th century America. This production was a result of the business relationship between the Prestele family and Franklin Kelsey Phoenix of Bloomington, Illinois.

The Bloomington Nursery was owned and operated by Franklin Kelsey Phoenix. In 1867, it was known as the largest nursery west of the Appalachians and the second largest in the nation. Mr. Phoenix hired William Henry Prestele (and later, his brother, Joseph, Jr.) to create the vividly colored and detailed lithographs used by the nursery's traveling sales agents to market new varieties of fruit, trees, shrubs and flowers. These practical, yet elegant, works of art contributed greatly to the success of the local nursery and helped alter the face of the prairie landscape. The John Phoenix family donated the bound collection of 125 lithographs and other archival materials related to the Bloomington Nursery in 1996.

The McLean County Museum of History, located in Bloomington, first became aware of the Prestele and Phoenix relationships in the early 1980s when its then librarian, Greg Koos, aided Charles van Ravensway in research for his book *Drawn From Nature: The Botanical Art of Joseph Prestele and His Sons* (Smithsonian Press 1984). The donation by John Phoenix provided the museum with a tremendously rich resource, by which this story could be told through exhibition and this catalog.

The exhibition was organized, designed and built by Susan Hartzold, the museum's Curator of Collections and Exhibits. Daryl Watson, an historian of Midwestern American nurseries, graciously agreed to serve as guest curator. The museum is grateful for the excellent

design of this catalog by Jane Flanders Osborn and for the careful text editing by Ruth Cobb. We are equally grateful for the printing of this catalog by Illinois Graphics of Bloomington.

The McLean County Museum of History, founded in 1892 collects and preserves objects, papers and books that document the rich history of McLean County. Through exhibitions, publications and educational programs it shares these rich stores of the past with the people of central Illinois. It's ability to do so is made possible by generous contributions of time, talent and philanthropic support of the people of McLean County.

### *About the Exhibit:*

#### Contributors

### *In Memory of Jessie Dolan Behr (1925 - 2007)*

This special exhibition and accompanying catalogue have been made possible in part by a gift from Carl Behr and Fred Dolan, husband and brother of the late Jessie Dolan Behr. Jessie's many interests included history, art, antiques, and nature. This exhibition encompasses all those elements, and provides an opportunity to display and interpret the fine collection of nineteenth-century lithographs from the Phoenix Collection.

### *Jesse Fell Questers #226*

Members of the Jesse Fell Questers raised more than \$10,000 through bake sales and grants from the State and International Organizations for the conservation of the Museum's collection of hand-colored lithographs by William Henry Prestele. Questers is an international organization with a mission to educate members through the research and study of antiques. The Bloomington, Illinois chapter was established in 1965.

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## *Introduction*

**A**s the American frontier expanded into the prairies of the Midwest, a voracious appetite for tree planting arose. A multitude of kinds, mostly fruit, were supplied to both farmers and townspeople by a rapidly expanding nursery industry. The demand was fueled by advances in horticulture, transportation, journals and societies, and a newly emerging art-form—colored lithographs made specifically to help market the latest varieties of fruits and flowers.

F. K. Phoenix, who opened his Bloomington (Illinois) Nursery in 1852, possessed a love of nature and a missionary zeal to plant the prairies. In 1867, after building the largest nursery in the “West,” he hired artist William Henry Prestele to oversee the design and production of exquisite hand-colored lithographs for the trade. These fruit and flower “plates” greatly facilitated the marketing of nursery stock in America. The Prestele family was German—immigrants who came to America in 1843 as part of an “Inspirationists” religious movement (now the Amana Colonies). The father, Joseph Sr., did much to pioneer this newly emerging commercial art form in America.

The Prestele’s carefully produced lithographs, and the missionary zeal of Phoenix, combined art, innovation and idealism to create a potent force for the planting of the prairies. The prints displayed here provide an intimate window into the plants and people that helped shape an American landscape.

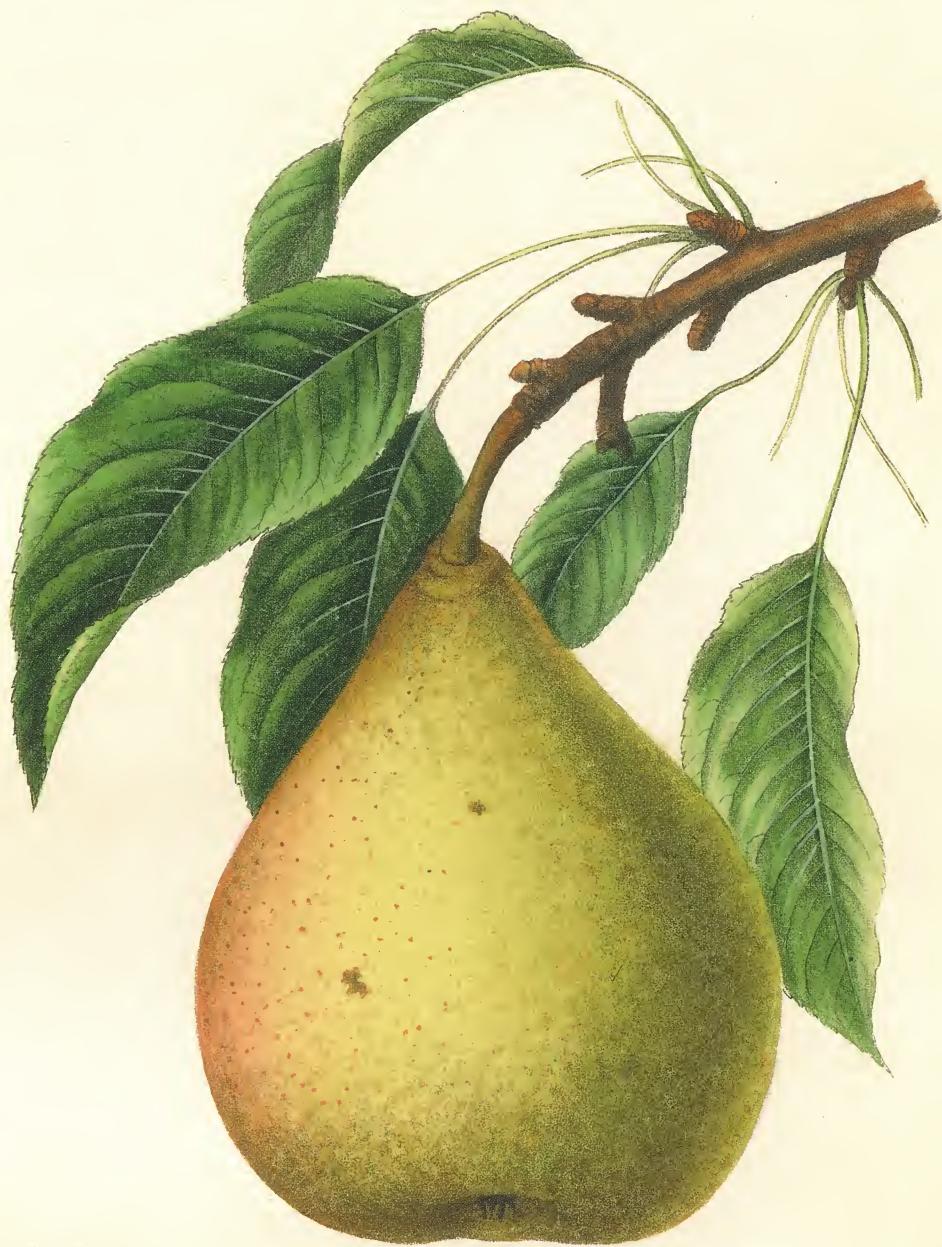


JONATHAN APPLE



GLADIOLUS.

FIG.2



THE BEURRE SUPERFIN PEAR.

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# Gifts to the Prairie.

## The Work of Pioneer Nurserymen and the Art of the Prestele Family

### *The Prestele Family Roots*

**A**rtist and lithographer Joseph Prestele and his family were blessed with incredible talent, but they would never have acknowledged it, or even permitted themselves to believe it. Any talent they had belonged to God. Their faith taught that humility was a virtue—everyone was to “serve God and seek salvation.”<sup>1</sup>

Joseph Prestele was a German immigrant who with his family migrated to America in 1843. He did so as part of the “Community of True Inspiration,” a group of like-minded believers who traced their origins back to southern Germany in 1714.<sup>2</sup>

The Inspirationists believed the dominant Lutheran Church had become too distant and formal. They desired to eliminate pomp, ceremony and intellectual discourse and return to a simple, spiritual understanding of God and his Word. Their movement was part of a larger one known as Pietism, characterized by humility, complete devotion to God and prayerful study of the Bible. Separate groups, however, arose within the movement.

The “True” Inspirationists believed that God still spoke directly through believers. Their “inspiration” was thus equal to that of the Old Testament prophets and their divine revelations became equal to scripture. While anyone might become so inspired, elders were on hand to evaluate the sincerity and veracity of those so blessed. Two critical criteria were: 1) was the inspiration in keeping with the Holy Bible and 2) did the revelation enhance in any way the individual inspired. If the latter applied, then it was not divine.<sup>3</sup>

Congregations of believers soon came into conflict with the established churches (both Catholic and Lutheran) and governments. Adherents to the Inspiration movement refused to serve in the military, swear oaths to the State, or send their children to church or state-sponsored schools. Persecution followed, inspired leaders were silenced and the movement began to fade.

Unprecedented turmoil developed in the German states in the early 1800s with the Napoleonic Wars, famine and economic and political unrest. As a result, the Inspirationist movement revived. Christian Metz became a guiding force, and was viewed as a true and gifted prophet. He helped bring diverse congregations together in southern Germany where they leased large estates and monasteries where rich and poor shared labor and love.

Joseph Prestele was born in 1796. He lived in Munich and became a convert and joined the “Community” in 1837 (the Inspirationists did not like the term “church”).<sup>4</sup> Joseph studied flower painting in Vienna under Johann Knapp, one of the most prominent horticultural painters of the time. By age 20, Joseph was the artist for the Royal Botanical Garden of Munich. He excelled at the new techniques of lithography (literally “writing on stone”). He quickly became acquainted with the leading artists, painters and botanists of the day. His exquisite work was widely distributed among Europe’s elite.

After he joined the True Inspiration movement, Joseph became extremely committed to the cause and put God’s work ahead of his own to help the community. When Christian Metz revealed God’s will that the group move to America to avoid the turmoil and persecution of Europe, few questioned it, certainly not Joseph. In 1843, Metz and 350 believers settled onto a 5,000-acre site in western New York near Buffalo. It was wilderness, having recently been taken from the Seneca Indians. Included in the group of believers was Joseph, his wife, and their children, including Joseph, Jr., Gottlieb and William Henry. The youngest, William, was then only five years of age.<sup>5</sup>

Their new Utopian settlement was named “Ebenezer” or “hitherto hath the Lord helped us.” At this time the movement became truly communal.



All property was held jointly and individuals were assigned tasks by a group of elders. Joseph (and presumably his sons) was soon responsible for tending to orchards and gardens. All believer families were assigned a house, built by the assigned carpenters in the community. Prayer, hard work and humility were the order of the day.

Joseph, the artist, was faithful to the task, but perhaps not always happy. The elders may have recognized this, or they may have realized his artistic talent could generate much needed cash for the colony. Whatever the case, Joseph was permitted to return to his artwork and seek commissions. All profits became the property of the whole, in keeping with the other business enterprises (primarily agriculture and manufacturing) undertaken by the community.

Asa Gray, America's eminent Harvard professor of botany, encouraged Joseph and helped him with commissions. Soon the name Prestele was synonymous with artwork of the highest order. Finely polished tablets of limestone from Germany (the best source of the day) were hand engraved by Joseph after being coated with a gum-like oil. Uncolored paper prints, called plates, were then made by cleaning and inking the stone and briefly pressing the paper to it. The print was then carefully hand-tinted with watercolors by Joseph and his older children. Great care was needed to get the color exactly right. Sometimes the Presteles created their own artwork (frequently "drawn from nature") and at other times they worked from the designs or drawings of others.<sup>6</sup>

While second-son Gottlieb followed diligently in his father's footsteps (both in the faith and in the profession), the other two sons disappointed him and the elders (or brothers) in the community. First Joseph, Jr. and then William Henry left the colony for New York City, America's largest and most cosmopolitan city. This was sometime before 1858, at which time Joseph, Sr. and most of Ebenezer left for the newly established colony of Amana, Iowa.

The father described Joseph in one letter as "unruly." Another letter described William Henry as a "skilled and clever youth but lively and active."<sup>7</sup> Apparently both boys engaged in freelance artwork in New York City but continued to help their father by coloring prints whenever he sent them.

The strict religious discipline and control of the Ebenezer community may have been too much for Joseph, Jr. and William Henry. Buffalo was only a short distance away and was part of a major migration route for tens of thousands of diverse migrants moving westward. It was the bustling mercantile center of the American frontier where individualism, independence and self-reliance reigned supreme. It was nothing like the German States where a strong government and church controlled every facet of one's life. Ebenezer may have simply been too close to worldly influences.

Christian Metz was convinced by God to move farther West—to avoid the secular and sinful world of western New York. He and other elders searched and finally were led to 26,000 acres in eastern Iowa, near the small hamlet of Iowa City. Joseph and his son Gottlieb moved to this new location in 1858.<sup>8</sup> "Amana" was the name given to the seven new villages and the rich farmland surrounding them. It was taken from the Old Testament Song of Solomon and meant "to remain faithful."<sup>9</sup>

Communal life continued. Houses had no kitchens—meals were taken in a large meeting house. The economy continued to be based on agriculture and manufacturing. The Presteles continued their lithographic work but on a reduced scale. It was difficult to serve clients on the East Coast from such a distance. They did continue to turn out nursery plates, a new market that was increasing rapidly as nurserymen used the plates to promote their stock. Much of their business turned toward the huge nurseries of Genesee County in western New York and clients like the Mount Hope Nurseries of Ellwanger and Barry, then the largest single nursery in the world. Around 1860 they pub-



lished a catalog listing 233 images of fruit and flowering plants available to the nursery trade.<sup>10</sup>

Joseph Prestele died in 1867, the same year that William Henry moved from New York to Bloomington, Illinois to work for F. K. Phoenix and his Bloomington Nursery, then the largest in the "West." Gottlieb continued the Amana print business, but the Prestele name had disappeared from their lithographs, replaced by "Amana Society." Around 1875 Gottlieb retired and his equipment and prints were apparently acquired by William Henry, who had moved to Coralville (just outside Iowa City) to set up his own business.<sup>11</sup>

The Amana Colonies continued as they had until 1932, the year of the "Great Change." Due to the Depression and various outside influences, the colony officially abandoned the communal way of life. Today, the organization consists of three parts: The first and foremost is the Amana Church, a community still best described as "versammlung," meaning a meeting, gathering or collection of believers. The Amana Society Corporation (a regular stock company) controls the businesses, including the management of the 26,000 acres of farmland. The third aspect is reflected in the seven towns that are managed collectively. Those living today in the seven communities may or may not be members of the "church" or shareholders in the business corporation.<sup>12</sup> The arrangement seems to work well, although nineteenth century residents like Joseph, Sr. might be surprised by the changes.

### *William Henry Prestele*

**A**lthough William Henry, the younger son of Joseph, led a largely independent life after leaving the Ebenezer colonies sometime prior to 1858, he was still part of an otherwise close family. While on his own, he maintained both professional and personal ties with his parents and siblings. The following information on his life draws heavily from Charles van Ravenswaay's

*Drawn from Nature* and from information supplied by Ken Henson, great grandson of William.<sup>13</sup>

Wilhelm Heinrich Prestele was born in 1838 in Hessen-Darmstadt, Germany. His father had only a few years before converted to Christian Metz's "Community of True Inspirationists." Young William Henry was only five when his family, along with the rest of the believers, migrated to western New York in 1843.

The Community at Ebenezer was characterized by long hours of hard work and constant admonitions on the ways of the Lord. Little is known of William Henry's boyhood years, other than an admonition at age fourteen by none other than Christian Metz himself: "Remove from your heart all mischief, all abominations and bad habits, and draw nearer to the Lord."<sup>14</sup>

Joseph taught his youngest son the basics of his artwork, primarily the coloring of plates, along with a healthy respect for detail and plant identification. Young William appears not to have learned the art of engraving directly on stone, his father's preferred method of lithography. The boy did show talent, so it was with much disappointment that Joseph watched another son leave the Community and move to New York City where his oldest brother, Joseph, Jr., had already gone. Unlike that older brother, however, who seems to have moved farther and farther from family and Community, young William stayed in contact.

The Inspirationists, then as now, maintained an "open door" policy with discontents. Those who left were welcomed back if they forsook the ways of the world and renewed their commitment to spiritual growth among the believers.<sup>15</sup> William never took that step but remained especially close to his mother. His deeply spiritual father, who had become an elder in the Community, continued to send him lithographed plates to color. Otherwise, both William and Joseph, Jr. supported themselves in New York City through freelance artwork.

In a move that could not have pleased his father, William Henry volunteered to serve in the Union army



with the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. He joined Company E, 26th Regiment, New York Volunteers.<sup>16</sup> This may reveal an important part of William's character. The Inspirationists were pacifists and refused to serve in the military, but they also abhorred slavery. The company William joined was from western New York and made up of a large number of Germans.

The 26<sup>th</sup> saw heavy action throughout the War of the Rebellion and served with distinction. One of the deadliest battles of the entire war was the Battle of Antietam, and in that fight, William suffered a bullet wound through the right thigh. The wound was so severe that it kept him hospitalized for months, up until the time he was mustered out in May of 1863. The wound bothered him the rest of his life. He sought often in later years to get an increase in his pension for the disability, but with little success. Ironically, his father had served five years of mandatory service in a German army at the same age, so perhaps this influenced young William's decision to enlist. Whatever the case, one must believe that the war experience left William a wiser and more humble young man.

Shortly after being discharged, he married an Irish girl, Anne Smythe, from New York City. By the next year they had a daughter named Margaret (later called Elisabeth). The New York City Directory for 1864 lists him as an artist living on Ninth Avenue.

There is little other information on William Henry's life at this time. Certainly he was known to many people in the plant trade, if for no other reason than his father's name. Joseph, with the aid of his children, especially Gottlieb, was known throughout botanical and horticultural circles as one of America's premier artists. His lithographs were known both in America and Europe as some of the best. They appeared in many botanical publications and later in the newly emerging nursery plate trade, initially centered in western New York.

The latter trade started slowly but gained steam rapidly. It was, in fact, only a matter of time before Joseph's art and the need of nurserymen to better market

fruits and flowers found each other. The nursery trade had learned very early that traveling agents, often called "tree peddlers," were needed to sell stock beyond local trading areas. Sometimes it was simply a merchant or dealer in a distant city who would advertise locally, take orders, collect payments and then distribute the plants after they were shipped in the spring. A newspaper ad in the western mining town of Galena, Illinois is typical:

**Fruit Trees, Ornamental Trees  
and Plants...Nursery of Wm. Kenrick  
of Newton, Massachusetts.  
All orders left with Dr. A. Philleo,  
who is agent,  
will be promptly attended to.  
Catalogues gratis, on application.**<sup>18</sup>

Small ads in newspapers, catalogs and agents were useful ways of marketing nursery stock, but most customers had no idea what a particular fruit or flower might look like and even simple line drawings were few and far between. Finding a better way to educate and entice a potential customer (wholesale or retail) to buy a new or trusted variety of fruit or flower became the dream of every nurseryman.

The first colored lithographs appeared in the new and popular horticultural journals of the 1840s and '50s. Joseph Prestele received many commissions for these and it seems likely he, nurserymen and printers all saw the possibilities. Years later, son William Henry declared in the "Introductory" to his *Catalogue of Fruit and Flower Plates...Lithographed and Colored by Wm. H. Prestele* (published in 1877 in Iowa City, Iowa), that his father had originated the idea:

*It is now nearly 30 years since my father...  
"ORIGINATED" and made the first Lithographed/  
Colored Fruit and Flower Plates for the use of  
nurserymen in the U.S.*<sup>19</sup>

The first nurseries used a simple ad in a newspaper or sent out a small catalog to sell their stock. Traveling



agents, called “tree peddlers” proved advantageous, but had little to show customers until the appearance of colored lithographs, pioneered by Joseph Prestele. These beautifully colored prints caught everyone’s fancy and proved a boon to the trade.

Charles van Ravenswaay described the transition to nursery plates this way:

*...Prestele adapted the art of botanical illustration to the commercial needs of nursery selling, principally by eliminating details important to botanists—such as seeds, roots, and cross-sections of blossoms—but which nurserymen did not need or want.<sup>20</sup>*

The results were “visually arresting” and soon the huge Mt. Hope Nursery of Rochester was supplying these colored prints to its agents, traveling and otherwise. Other nurseries followed suit. A few printers even began to offer them for a modest amount to the public at large, for the beautiful and vibrant prints were often worthy of framing. They had become an emerging commercial art form of some significance. It seems likely that William, in search of commissions, visited the major nurseries, printers and publishers of the New York area.

It is known that William early on developed a close relationship with Charles Downing, brother of Andrew Jackson Downing and a highly respected horticulturist and pomologist in his own right. Years later, in 1884, when Charles was recovering from a severe injury, William thanked his friend and benefactor with a beautifully designed “show card” that read in part:

*With kind feeling and a heart full of everlasting gratitude, this collection of American Fruits and Flowers is presented to you, as a token of esteem, by your humble grateful friend, by whom your noble and true friendship, during the hours of his severest trials will always be remembered...<sup>21</sup>*

In 1867, two momentous changes occurred in William Henry’s life. His father died and he was hired

by nurseryman F. K. Phoenix of Bloomington, Illinois to oversee the design and production of nurserymen’s plates of fruits and flowers. It apparently was an offer too good to pass up. William still had close ties to his mother and his two brothers, which may also have influenced his move from New York City to a location much closer to the Amana Colonies of eastern Iowa.

### *Franklin Kelsey Phoenix—Prairie Visionary*



Franklin Kelsey Phoenix was educated, energetic, idealistic and driven. With missionary zeal he sought to improve the physical if not moral condition of the western resident by providing him with all manner of fruits and flowers for home and garden.

F. K. Phoenix held true to the beliefs and wishes of his father. He was in many ways the stereotypical Yankee from the New England and western New York region: energetic, educated, driven, shrewd, religious and moralistic. He and his father believed strongly in honesty, integrity and in serving God.

F. K. was born in a small village in Perry, New York in 1823.<sup>22</sup> Perry is in the famed “Genesee Country” of western New York State, some of the richest and most beautiful land anywhere. This region, with Rochester at its heart, became home to some of the largest and most profitable nurseries in the world.

Samuel F. Phoenix, father of F. K., was born in 1798 and along with his brother Henry, apprenticed to a tanner at a young age.<sup>23</sup> Samuel did well at business but came under the influence of the periodic revivals that swept the country. Western New York became so



noted for its many fire and brimstone revivals that people began calling it the "burned-over district." Methodists, Baptists and Presbyterians were usually the leading "lights."

Samuel and brother Henry joined the Baptist Church about 1830 when "they spilled their stock of alcoholic liquor and devoted themselves to the cause of total abstinence."<sup>24</sup> It wasn't long before Samuel began fighting that other great sin of the world—slavery. In 1835 he was a delegate to the State's first anti-slavery convention and soon became an abolitionist of the first order. By this time he also had become an ordained Baptist minister and preached heartily wherever he went.

Both Samuel and Henry came to the Wisconsin Territory in 1836 with a vision. They hoped to establish a temperance colony based upon the Holy Scripture. Their first claim, accordingly, was christened the "Temperance Colony Claim."<sup>25</sup> Here, a utopian community was platted and named Delavan, located in present-day Walworth County, Wisconsin very close to the Illinois State line. Delavan was named in honor of a very strong temperance leader back in New York State.

It was in the new wilderness town of Delavan that young twelve-year old F. K. found himself in 1837. Perhaps because of his early years in Genesee County, he grew up "loving flowers, trees and all nature." His neighbors were largely from those parts of New York where his father and uncle had resided. Both men were actively recruiting settlers whom they believed exhibited high moral character and religious principals. But only three years later, in 1840, F. K.'s father died suddenly.<sup>26</sup> It must have been a blow to young Franklin, but he never wavered, continuing his father's enterprises.

The next year young F. K. returned to Perry and the Genesee Country to continue his education. He must have had his eye—and perhaps education—on the nursery business all along, because he moved back to Delavan in 1842, shortly after his uncle Henry died unexpectedly, and began without delay his life-long profession—that of a nurseryman.

F. K.'s obituaries all mention his tireless energy and boundless enthusiasm. Such must surely have been the case, because he quickly became in his 20s a respected voice in America's horticultural community. No better example can be given than a letter he received from Andrew Jackson Downing in 1847. Downing may well have been America's foremost horticulturist. He and his brother Charles managed the highly respected Newburgh Nursery overlooking the Hudson a short distance above New York City. Andrew had already written numerous articles and several popular books on horticulture and landscape design. He was editor and publisher of *The Horticulturist, Journal of Rural Art and Rural Taste*, perhaps the preeminent horticultural journal of the day.<sup>27</sup>

Downing, whose letter first expresses approval that trees ordered by Phoenix were received in good order, then goes on to say:

*Your two articles were received with great pleasure . . . I would be glad at all times to receive anything that you may have to communicate for my pages as I see you are very well able to furnish excellent and most acceptable articles.*<sup>28</sup>

Both articles were technical in nature, one on the art of grafting, something that fruit growers of the day learned mostly by trial and error.

As his business grew, F. K. Phoenix traveled periodically to the East to inspect and buy wholesale stock for his Delavan (and later Bloomington) nursery. This was a fact of business life at the time—the new nurseries of the West were not equipped to propagate and grow large quantities of plant material, certainly not at the competitive prices offered by the large eastern establishments.

On one such trip in 1848, F. K. sent a series of letters back to his mother in Delavan describing his observations. Revealing shades of his father, he complained of stopping at the "Planter's Hotel" in New



York City. It turned out to be nothing more than an “Irish Vampire Hole alias Tavern” where he obtained a room for the night that was nothing more than a “mosquito cage.”<sup>29</sup>

While back east he visited Thorburn’s Seed Store, Prince & Parson’s huge nursery at Flushing, Long Island (talking at length with their head gardener), and Charles Downing at the Newburgh Nursery—all premium establishments of the day. He then attended a huge horticultural exhibition at Boston (renowned for their horticultural advancements) and where he made some “pleasant acquaintances.”<sup>30</sup> He also visited the Mt. Hope Nurseries of Ellwanger and Barry at Rochester, then the largest nursery in the country and one that on occasion supplied F. K. with trees and shrubs.

The 1850s saw an active expansion of the nursery industry in the West. Illinois developed an especially active group of fledgling nurserymen and horticulturists. F. K. Phoenix, living just across the border in Wisconsin, quickly became an active participant. The Illinois Horticultural Society was started in 1856 with F. K. an active member and frequent correspondent.<sup>31</sup> It seems his Illinois contacts led him early on to consider moving his business from Delavan to Bloomington. A slightly warmer climate and exceptional soils may have been inducements, but a centrally located town with excellent transportation facilities looming must certainly have helped. The Illinois Central Railroad was under construction and when completed in 1856 was the longest single line in the world. It provided rapid and dependable access to all of the major markets Phoenix hoped to serve. Rapid transportation was critical to the nursery business and Phoenix, always looking for the latest, quickest, and best, certainly saw the potential.

Phoenix was also encouraged to relocate by Jesse Fell, whose earnest solicitations and tree planting interests coincided with his own. Fell, a tree planter of the highest order, actually secured legislation

permitting communities to protect young street trees from livestock, horses and wagons. He also set out 12,000 trees in Normal, Illinois before, it was said, a single house had been erected.<sup>32</sup> His example was a good one:

*The stimulus and example so given, together with the ease of acquisition afforded by the nurseries, made planting a fashion. People vied with each other in making their private grounds beautiful.<sup>33</sup>*

Phoenix purchased the Robert Fell Nursery in 1851, only one-half block from the new Illinois Central tracks. The next year he purchased more land and moved to the northeast corner of the city. Full operations began when F. K. returned in 1854 with his family. He expanded continuously until 1877 when the business changed hands, and for twenty years he pushed, cajoled and inspired thousands in the West to plant their prairie homes and farms with the best trees, fruits and flowers of the day.<sup>34</sup>

Phoenix used every means available to spread the word and sell the trees. He also shipped nursery stock the fastest way possible—by the new railroads then criss-crossing the land. In 1871 it cost only 50 cents to ship a 100 pound box the 125 miles to Chicago, with the shipment arriving the same day.<sup>35</sup> He also publicized the work of the North-West Fruit Growers Association and Illinois State Horticultural Society. Strong encouragement was given to horticultural exhibitions, fairs and the use of premiums, all of which had become extremely popular by the 1850s. He even encouraged patrons to “Form Clubs and buy at wholesale!” with “Special inducements on large and early orders.”<sup>36</sup>

Phoenix was also a strong supporter of—and participant in—the rash of new and moderately priced agricultural and horticultural journals then proliferating. These publications, filled with the latest news, correspondence and findings about all manner of



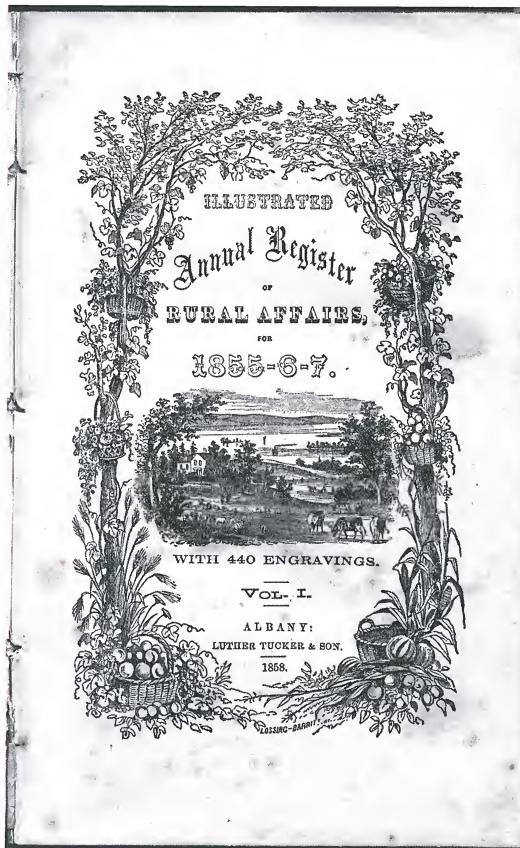
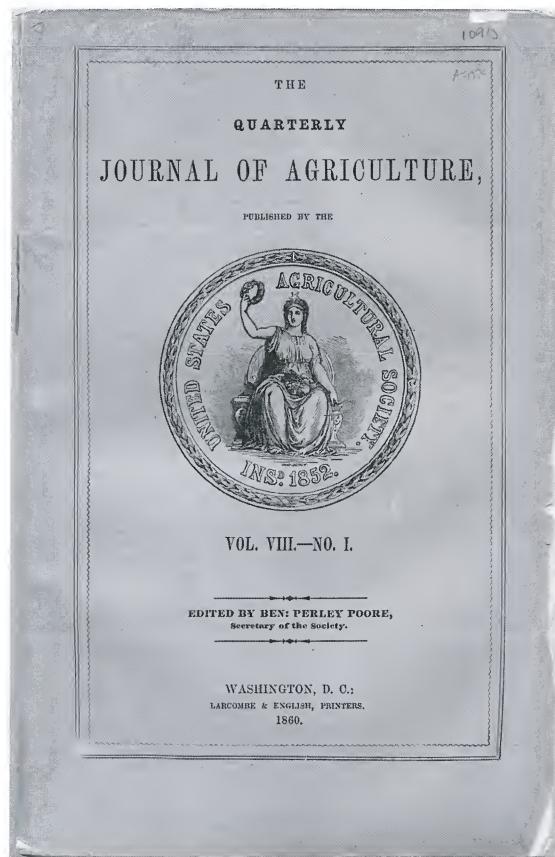
things—most notably fruits and flowers—had become indispensable reading to many Americans. Phoenix's nursery catalogs frequently listed journals and societies thought worthy of patronage. He was a constant contributor and correspondent to many for over thirty years. "Every Farmer, Gardener or Fruit-Grower in America should take as many...as he can afford." <sup>37</sup>

Admonitions from Phoenix appeared throughout his catalogs and elsewhere over the years. Typical was the following:

**DISTANT DWELLERS, scores of miles from  
Nursery or R. R. Station, can obtain By Mail  
for a few dollars, a splendid start of our beau-**

**tiful Fruit and Shade Trees, Roses and Flowering Plants.—What happiness, Civilization, and profit will grow up with them—Your own Tree and Flower Children! Homes without children, Trees, Flowers! NEVER a true Home! As well, good Society without School, Churches and Newspapers.**<sup>38</sup>

Phoenix was more than a respected authority on the hundreds of varieties of fruit then being disseminated. He was also an authority on the best ways to propagate, pack, ship and plant nursery stock. He distributed with orders exact directions for the planting and care of his trees. With few alterations, his directions would serve well any tree planter today.

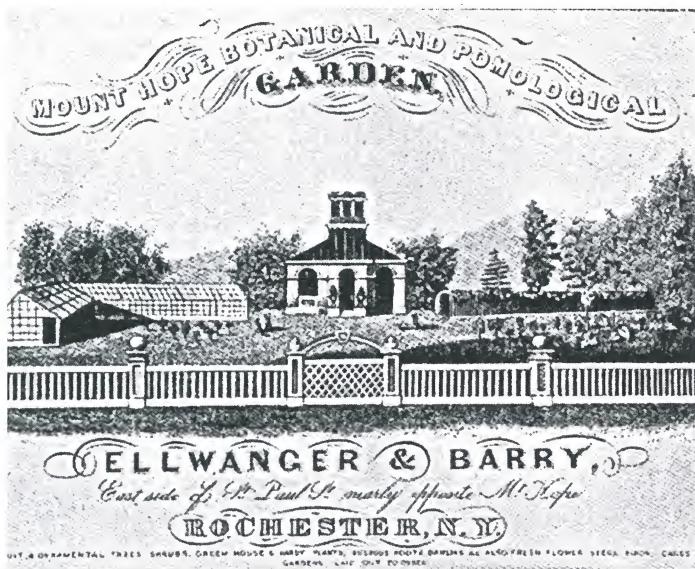


Interest in all things horticultural rose sharply in mid-nineteenth century America. From better ways to grow and ship to better ways to market, every topic was covered in the new journals. F. K. Phoenix encouraged all who were able to subscribe to as many as possible.



## *The Bloomington Nursery and the Prairie Transformed*

**T**he nursery as we know it today originated during a period of unprecedented advances in botany, horticulture, transportation and marketing. As America grew and communication expanded the nursery trade exploded. New plants and varieties were introduced to the trade daily as collectors, nurserymen and others looked for anything new, different or better.



THE MOUNT HOPE NURSERIES—1855

This quaint representation of the greenhouses and office of Ellwanger and Barry has been reproduced from the *Ellwanger & Barry, Descriptive Catalogue of Fruits* (Rochester, 1860).

Rochester, New York became the nursery capital of America during the 1840s and 50s. The Mt. Hope Nursery, established in 1840 by George Ellwanger and Patrick Barry, became the largest in the world. Their early use of nursery plates was soon adopted by others, most notably F. K. Phoenix in Bloomington, Illinois.

Apples, pears and grapes received the most attention and dominated the nursery trade until after

the Civil War. Strictly ornamental plants, mostly the domain of the affluent, steadily gained in popularity, particularly in the older settlements. Improved propagating techniques, large-scale production and marketing, and reduced prices permitted the newest and most expensive kinds to be adopted by the working masses only a few years after they had been exclusively the domain of the wealthy. The emerging Victorian middle class loved it.

Nowhere was the growth of the nursery industry more prominent than western New York.<sup>39</sup> Rochester, in the heart of the "Genesee Country," (and to a lesser extent Buffalo), became the modern nursery capital of the world by the late 1840s. The Mt. Hope Nursery, founded in 1840 by a German (George Ellwanger) and an Irishman (Patrick Barry), became the largest in the world. Their nursery benefited, like the others in the region, from a perfect location: rich farmlands along one of the most important and heavily traveled westward migration routes in America; proximity to canals, lake steamers and railroads; and a good labor pool. The movers and shakers of the trade were invariably men of vision, ambition, innovation and marketing savvy.

As settlement moved westward, trees had been eliminated to make way for towns, fields and farms. After a period of time, however, new landscapes began to emerge, characterized by a greater variety of non-crop plants. The prairies of the Midwest, however, were unique. Here, a frontier culture totally dependent upon trees encountered a landscape devoid of them. Phoenix stated the problem quite simply:

*Trees are the great need of the prairies; for shelter, fuel, fruit, farm, town, railroad, building and landscape purposes; for all comfort, profit, goodfellowship and civilization's sake generally.<sup>40</sup>*

Transforming the prairie would require energy and vision. Given the swift movement of settlement, there



was little time for experimentation. William Cullen Bryant contrasted the northern Illinois landscape with what he had noted five years previously:

*Frame or brick house in many places had taken the places of log-cabins; the road for long distances now passed between fences; the broad prairie, enclosed, was turned into immense fields of maize, oats, and wheat, and was spotted here and there with young orchards...* <sup>41</sup>

The City of Chicago presented a somewhat different picture. Reported one observer:

*The magic ideas...connected with such phrases as "corner lots," "rents," "double in value," "going up," are too much for "trees," "shrubbery," and "roses".* <sup>42</sup>

Clearly, the prairie environment and rapid settlement presented special challenges to all who would plant the prairie.

F. K. Phoenix was up to the challenge. Like many of his colleagues, he was a visionary of enormous talent and unbounded enthusiasm. He believed the prairie to be superior to all other parts of the country for the growing of fruits and flowers. New residents had many failures as they tried planting eastern kinds that proved poorly suited to different soils, summer heat and cold, blustery winter winds. Phoenix was one of the first to realize that new varieties and better handling methods had to be developed to successfully plant the prairie. His Bloomington Nursery established large orchards to test new varieties of fruit, all the while keeping meticulous records.<sup>43</sup>

Phoenix also argued forcefully for the economic wisdom of planting fruit trees: "Wheat at 50 cts. Don't Pay as Well as Apples at \$1.20, the price for...apples in Bloomington this 13<sup>th</sup> day of March, 1858." <sup>44</sup> His calculations revealed that a good apple orchard could yield from \$25 to \$50 per acre while wheat could only yield \$15.<sup>45</sup> He was more than ready to give thorough

directions on the selection, planting and care of an orchard for a farm or town lot.

*A Word (or two) to Farmers!*



**ADVICE GRATIS!**

**W**HAT AT 50 CTS. DON'T PAY AS WELL as Apples at \$1.20, the price for Little Romanites and other little apples in Bloomington this 13<sup>th</sup> day of March, 1858. Wheat, Oats, Corn, Pork, Lard and Bacon, Butter, Eggs and Apples, Wood, Hay and Straw, Old Copper, Brass and Iron, Hides, Rugs and Old Notes, Copper, Brass, Iron, Gardening Saws, Chicken Fixins, Live Stock, and Country Produce, generally taken in exchange for WHAT THEY WILL OBTAIN, in Bloomington or any other market for the "Root of all Evil," and that exchanged for any other roots or tops in

**PHOENIX'S CELEBRATED COLLECTION,**

**Bloomington Nursery and Garden**

Bloomington, Illinois Daily Pantagraph, May 19, 1862, p. 1, col. 4.

He also insisted that shade and ornamental plants would add immeasurably to the value of any homestead, both esthetically and otherwise: "What but trees can ever purge the prairie air of its desert bleakness and desolation?" <sup>46</sup> He continued: "Let every landholder, for his own sake, and for tree-loving, fruit-craving humanity's sake, plant good fruit and shade trees right, and then take care of them!" <sup>47</sup>

*Of Evergreens, Windbreaks and Hedges*

**A**s easterners moved into the Midwest with its expansive prairies, they longed for the landscapes left behind. Evergreens were a fond part of their remembrances. They added color to the dreary white of the winter landscape and provided shelter from the cold winds. But evergreen trees were very difficult to transplant and grow and their culture on a large scale had to wait for the nurseries to develop better methods of propagation, transplanting and packing.



The Rochester nurseries led the way and the western nurseries, once established, soon followed. F. K. Phoenix quickly became a leading advocate for the planting of evergreen trees on the prairie.

*The first evergreens, of which there are thousands of magnificent testimonials now beautifying every community in the state, and from which Bloomington derived the title of "The Evergreen City," were imported by Mr. Phoenix from Newbury, N. Y.<sup>48</sup>*

The largest single producer of evergreens in the nation in the 1850s was Ellwanger and Barry's Mt. Hope Nurseries in Rochester, New York. Their records reveal that tens of thousands of trees were supplied to the "West" during this period, most to western nurseries.<sup>49</sup> The most sought after kinds for the prairie were the Norway spruce, hemlock, American arbor vitae, white pine, Scotch pine, Austrian pine and red cedar.

In the west, the Bloomington Nursery alone was



With great encouragement from nurserymen the appetite for evergreens, especially on the prairies of the West, became insatiable. The beautiful Italianate home of W. A. Pennell in Normal, Illinois was a good example. Pines were freely used, even in the front yard, although closely-cropped grass would have to await the arrival of push lawnmowers in the 1870s.

(Photo McLean County Museum of History.)

advertising over 150,000 of these evergreens for sale in 1862.<sup>50</sup> As demand exploded, Phoenix announced that he was "prepared to contract for planting Evergreens (in suitable enclosures) in Towns accessible by Railroad."<sup>51</sup>

### *Prairie Winds and Windbreaks*

**T**he new residents of the West found the prairie winds relentless, especially so in winter. Apple and other fruit trees suffered damage as twigs dried out and branches died back. Livestock also suffered, as did the farmer tending to daily chores. But the unchecked prairie winds were simply another mountain for F. K. Phoenix to climb. He wanted earnestly for the prairie to become the Eden of the West, and believed that hard work, knowledge and forceful action could solve whatever difficulty was encountered.

*Do you dislike the strong prairie winds? So do your fruit trees! Are your crops leveled by storms, your prairie farms altogether less valuable for their bleakness and nakedness.... Then PLANT TREES.<sup>52</sup>*

The Phoenix solution for protection from winter winds was practical and straightforward.

*To protect from winds, plant stocky [fruit] trees with low heads, and surround them with belts of Silver Maple, or some other rapid-growing trees, as the Black Walnut, Osage Orange, Golden or White Willow, Poplar, Cottonwood, or, better still for dense, permanent screens, belts of Evergreens. . . . Get a prairie farmer, his orchard, stock and crops once under a good "lee shore" timber screen, and he will not live "out-doors" thereafter.<sup>53</sup>*



The rich prairie soils of the West were a great inducement to settlement, but the unchecked winds were a hindrance to all who moved beyond the forest edge. F. K. Phoenix and others convinced the prairie resident that groves and belts of trees could have a lasting benefit. This image from the 1874 *McLean County Atlas* shows that at least one prairie dweller took Phoenix's admonitions to heart.

While the idea of one or more rows of protective trees was not new, the farm windbreak envisioned by Phoenix and others during this period is the one still seen today. They are iconic features of the farm and prairie landscape throughout the Midwest and beyond. The Norway spruce is the planting most commonly seen remaining—a tree propagated and sold by the tens of thousands by Phoenix and his agents. And for the townspeople with their small lots, smaller hedges and screens of arbor vitae served the same purpose, not only to shield but to offer privacy, too. Again, Phoenix and the Prestele prints were an indispensable part of the transformation.

### *Hedging a Bet: Fenced in With Osage Orange*

**G**ood fences make good neighbors" is an adage older than America. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, crops were fenced in, not livestock. Hogs and

cattle wandered to and fro, seeking whatever they could devour. Good fences required many trees, split into rails or sawed into boards nailed to posts. The cost to fence a new farm often equaled or exceeded the cost of the land itself. Those moving onto the prairie faced a quandary—how to fence the farm.

All sorts of solutions were bandied about in the press. Many were tried, including ditches, stumps, stones, sod, screens and wire. It was another unique dilemma for the prairie dweller. A solution came in the form of the Osage Orange, a plant that caught the imagination of nurserymen, horticulturists, the press...and finally the farmer.

The Osage Orange was native to the region of Arkansas where its wood was used by the Osage Indians for their bows. New settlers were attracted more to its rapid growth and spiny thorns. Frederick Jackson Turner of Jacksonville, Illinois planted several experimental hedges in the 1840s. He was so taken by their effectiveness at turning livestock that he became an insatiable crusader for the live fence. Nurserymen and others took note and soon the "hedge apple" was being propagated and sold in huge numbers.<sup>54</sup>

One respectable author even went so far as to paraphrase Job 1:10:

*Hast thou not made a hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side?*<sup>55</sup>

M. L. Dunlap, friend and fellow nurseryman of F. K. Phoenix, estimated the cost of fencing a quarter section of land (160 acres) for twenty years at about \$1596. A board fence, he determined, would cost nearly \$4,000 over the same period of time.<sup>56</sup>

F. K. Phoenix needed little convincing. He had already jumped in and joined the cause. As early as 1862 he had advertised "500,000 OSAGE ORANGE" for sale.<sup>57</sup> A reporter visiting his nursery in 1870 could not help but notice the extensive plantings of the Osage Orange:



*Osage, although not a specialty, is extensively grown. Between three and four millions of fine plants are now on hand and will be sold this spring.<sup>58</sup>*

The reporter was informed that production would be expanded by another twenty-five acres.

There can be little doubt that the legion of agents employed by Phoenix was a significant force in the distribution and promotion of Osage Orange hedges in the prairie states. While these fences never gained universal acceptance, they did become an indispensable part of the prairie landscape for over a century. Ironically, the death knell for the Osage Orange fence came just as Phoenix was expanding his operation. Joseph Glidden of DeKalb, Illinois began in 1874 to produce a new and highly effective barbed wire. Within a few short years it became the fence of choice for everyone and the Osage Orange hedges quickly fell out of favor. Few were kept trimmed to the recommended 4-6 feet and soon grew into large trees, creating the ribbons of green still seen among the corn and soybean fields of today.

### *The Growth Continues*

**D**espite years of growth, the always optimistic F. K. Phoenix believed that he could still expand his already huge nursery in central Illinois. In doing so, he could continue to improve the physical condition of the western resident—and hopefully his moral and spiritual condition as well. In his 1867 wholesale catalogue, Phoenix admonishes unequivocally:

**The Prairies for Trees, and Trees for the Prairies—Bloom and Beauty for the eye and our better nature—Fruit for the Palate and Health—Shade for Summer and Shelter for Winter—Buy or not, but Plant! O Reader!.... THEY GROW WHILE YOU SLEEP!**<sup>59</sup>

Phoenix must also have been encouraged by his friend and fellow nurseryman, Chicagoan John A. Kennicott, who was also horticultural editor of the *Prairie Farmer*—the most widely read and influential journal in the West. It was Kennicott who lauded the efforts of teacher turned nurseryman, Jonathan Baldwin Turner, for:

*...doing more good to his kind, and more credit to his own great abilities, than when he was hampering the “dead languages” into “dead heads.”<sup>60</sup>*

Perhaps it was no accident that Phoenix peppered his nursery catalogs with little bits of wisdom, one being “Botany and Living Sciences before dead Languages.”<sup>61</sup>

Phoenix had come to see the value of quality nursery plates. At first skeptical of plates and traveling agents, he felt like many westerners: wary of eastern peddlers claiming to represent some large nursery back east—a nursery that may or may not have been legitimate. These men carried about wildly colored and exaggerated plates depicting marvelous trees, fruits and flowers. One journalist described the bogus peddler in vivid detail:

*He wears a plug hat, high-heeled boots all “shined up,” with a carpet bag full of fine fruit plates....His tongue is as long as your arm, as oily as a piece of bacon, and as loose as a calf’s tail in fly-time.”<sup>62</sup>*

Phoenix complained in the newspaper: “What right have mean men among trees and fruits and flowers or their cultivators....By their fruits ye shall know them.”<sup>63</sup>

But if a picture is worth a thousand words, then a beautifully drawn and colored one might be worth 10,000. Phoenix determined to expand with plates and agents (not “peddlers”) and to select only the best of both. An example of the latter is W. R. Forshey, who became an agent for Phoenix shortly before moving to Nebraska in the 1860s. His biography later reported that he was:



*Engaged as an agent for fruit trees for F. K. Phoenix, of Bloomington, Ill., for two years and was very successful, then back to the nursery at Bloomington as foreman for one year, then back to Nebraska...<sup>64</sup>*

The Bloomington Nursery continued to expand, even during the Civil War. When many people could not afford to buy trees during that difficult time, he announced:

#### PRODUCE TAKEN IN EXCHANGE!

*As far as we can use it. Corn—any quantity of good quality—we will give a fine 6 to 8 ft. apple tree per bushel. Wood—say 25 cords; with a sprinkle of eggs—lard—chickens—apples—some livestock—&c.<sup>65</sup>*

The Bloomington *Pantagraph* reported in May of 1862 that Mr. Phoenix's business had been immense that year, with trees and plants being shipped to almost every point in the West: In addition:

*The energetic proprietor proposes increasing his facilities to a still greater extent, and has just closed a purchase with Messrs. Swett and Orme for seventy acres of land adjoining his present grounds, for which he paid \$100 per acre. The Phoenix Nursery is an ornament and blessing to our county...<sup>66</sup>*

During good times and bad, Phoenix proved a friend of the working class. He hired the poor and paid them well if they worked and were temperate. His son Fred wrote in 1869:

*The men are grafting now by the job and the most number of grafts put in in one day is 3200 which is [a] very large amount...they get 90cts a thousand.<sup>67</sup>*

It was later said that Phoenix's nursery "paid the largest salaries and wages of any similar institution in the west..."<sup>68</sup> It would seem likely, then, that Phoenix

offered William Henry Prestele very reasonable terms to relocate and take over the design and production of nursery plates.

#### Gifts to the Prairies: Prestele and Phoenix

##### T

he Bloomington Nursery of F. K. Phoenix reached its zenith in the late 1860s and very early '70s. In 1867, Phoenix listed his nursery at 240 acres with six greenhouses. It grew "Fruit, Ornamental & Nursery Stock, Flowers, Bulbs, Greenhouse and Garden Plants" with "GRAPES & ROSES A SPECIALTY."<sup>69</sup> The nursery was by this time the largest in the West and one of the very largest in the country.

Phoenix's Bloomington Nursery supplied thousands of catalogs to prospective customers (and to agents of the nursery). "Come and see or send a 3cent stamp for a catalogue by mail."<sup>70</sup> Catalogs were proving indispensable to the trade and were instrumental in the transformation of the landscape. The *American Agriculturist*, one of the most widely read journals of the day put it this way:

*To the novice there is nothing more fascinating than a catalogue. Whether he is to plant fruit or ornamental trees, he looks the list over and over, and is not so much in doubt as to what to take as to what he shall leave out.<sup>71</sup>*

The popularity of well done and informative catalogs led Phoenix and others, like Ellwanger and Barry, to experiment with the new lithographed and colored plates. These prints, appearing at a time when such things were quite novel, immediately caught the attention of all who viewed them. Agents properly fitted with a book of colored prints featuring the most recommended kinds of fruits and flowers had a leg up on the competition.



D. M. Dewey, a publisher and bookseller in Rochester, had already established a good business supplying nursery plates to the industry (including some done by Joseph, Sr. and Gottlieb) and it was becoming clear the potential was enormous.<sup>72</sup> Once again Phoenix bested the competition by establishing his own in-house production department and hiring one of the Presteles to oversee the design and coloring of these prints. The Prestele family's work was unmatched, which is exactly what Phoenix wanted: images that were accurate and informative. He wanted the best, and by this means he sought further expansion—and, as always—to improve the moral and physical well-being of the western resident.

Phoenix worked himself hard (and probably demanded the same of those around him). He was a keen observer of all things, a compassionate populist and a strict moralist. Honesty and accuracy were everything to him. A reporter visiting his huge nursery in 1870 described him as being kind-hearted and philanthropic, but also somewhat "impulsive."<sup>73</sup> The same reporter went on to say Mr. Phoenix was forty-five years of age but looked not a day over thirty-five:

*This is accounted for by the fact that he has ever been an open and avowed enemy to strong drink of every kind, using neither tea, tobacco nor coffee. The temperance cause has in him an earnest and powerful advocate; he contributes much time and money to its advancement.<sup>74</sup>*

Phoenix could also be deeply appreciative and kind. An article in the Bloomington, Illinois *Pantagraph*, written many years later, reported him to be "as charming a talker and companion as he was forty years ago, when...he set out to supply the wide world with trees."<sup>75</sup>

Artist William Henry Prestele moved from New York City to Bloomington, Illinois in 1867 and spent the next four years supervising the design and production of nursery plates for F.K. Phoenix.<sup>76</sup> The

move may have been a bittersweet one for William. Phoenix no doubt paid him well and the job must have been a godsend for a struggling artist, but it was also the same year that his father died in the Amana Colonies.

William apparently threw himself into his work and soon beautifully-colored prints of the best sorts of trees, fruits and flowers were being produced. An 1869 ad in *Harper's Weekly* announced not only 500 acres of nursery stock with ten greenhouses, but also "superior colored plates of Fruits and Flowers."<sup>77</sup> Those first plates from the Phoenix-Prestele arrangement received glowing praise from none other than the highly respected Thomas Meehan, publisher and editor of the *Gardener's Monthly and Horticultural Advertiser*.

*We have now before us a fruit piece...prepared by W. H. Prestele. We are in the habit of admiring European art in this line, and have often wished Americans could successfully compete with it. We now have it here. We never saw anything of the kind better executed from any part of the world. We wish the new enterprise every success.<sup>78</sup>*

Our only glimpse of the Phoenix-Prestele production department comes from a description of the nursery in 1870 by a reporter for the Bloomington *Weekly Pantagraph*:

*We were next shown the drawing and coloring department. This is under the especial supervision of Wm. H. Prestele, of N. Y., an artist of acknowledged talent and a most pleasant gentleman. We were shown fruit pieces [prints]—of perhaps a thousand varieties—beautiful, sweet, and so perfect that one was almost prompted to test their genuineness the old fashioned way—by taking a bite. Among several others [workers], there were four or five...girls busily engaged in drawing and coloring.<sup>79</sup>*



When artist William Henry Prestele went to work for F. K. Phoenix in 1867, he brought not only his own talent but that of his father and brothers as well. Within a short time a large collection of richly colored prints of trees, fruits and flowers were made available to the trade. Left: *Lonicera Tartarica Honeysuckle*. Right: *Summer Hagloe Apple*.

The project must have been going well with even better prospects for the future, because the reporter went on to talk of the intended expansion of this and other departments:

*This department, though very extensive—still the demand far exceeds the supply—and the management intends increasing the business in all its branches—the corps of artists will be doubled, and arrangements perfected to supply wants from all parts of the land.*<sup>80</sup>

Later that same year William's oldest brother, Joseph, Jr. was persuaded to leave New York City and join the business, revealing that expansion was, indeed, the

order of the day.

Immediately adjoining the “drawing and coloring” department was the main office, filled with clerks and mail stacked high from all parts of the country. It was here that the visiting reporter saw F. K. Phoenix himself, sitting “at the head and front of this mammoth establishment, the autocrat of horticulturists...”<sup>81</sup> While kind-hearted and philanthropic, he was also driven, managing every part of the organization. In 1870, he was at the top of his game.

The next year saw Phoenix advertising their colored lithographs as superior to all others. Four samples by mail were offered for \$1.00 and a huge list could be requested. The cost in 1875 was 25 cents each, with



bound collections of 100 for \$21.40.<sup>82</sup> This would total nearly \$340 today!

William Henry did not do engraving on stone like his father. Instead, he used newer techniques as described by van Ravenswaay:

*Some designs are drawn and shaded in "chalk" on stone. Others were drawn in "tusche," the lithographer's ink, either directly on stone or, as seems more likely, on transfer paper used in lithographic work, from which the image could be applied directly to a stone for printing. Thus drawings could have been sent to the printers for copying in chalk on stones, or finished drawings in "tusche."*<sup>83</sup>

Interestingly, The Des Moines Art Center found William Henry's prints "far less detailed than his father's, freely drawn with lithographic crayon, and more vividly colored with watercolor."<sup>84</sup> Phoenix did not invest in his own press, so new images were sent out to be printed by lithographic firms in Chicago, Louisville, St. Louis and Milwaukee.<sup>85</sup>

The Phoenix/Prestele arrangement seems to have worked well for a time, but for unspecified reasons, the relationship ended in 1871 or 1872 when William Henry partnered with L. B. Littlefield of Bloomington to produce his own fruit and flower plates. That effort lasted but a short time before William tried business on his own. This, too, did not last and in 1875, he removed to the little village of Coralville, Iowa, a short distance from Iowa City and near the Amana Colonies. He seems to have gotten a press and the necessary tools to continue his lithography. There is some reason to believe that he acquired these from Gottlieb, who retired about this time, ending the Amana Society's presence in the lithographing field.<sup>86</sup>

Meanwhile, F. K. Phoenix was in a desperate struggle to keep from losing his beloved nursery. He became overextended at the very time the nation entered the Panic of 1873, a depression perhaps not

exceeded until 1929. As early as 1872 he had to borrow \$100,000 from two New York financiers to continue his expansion.<sup>87</sup> By 1877, with the depression still lingering in parts of the economy, he was unable to make any interest payments to his creditors, and had to call it quits, voluntarily filing for bankruptcy.

Crushed by the failure, Phoenix left Bloomington and returned to Delavan, Wisconsin to establish another nursery, although of limited size and extent. He was able to continue his work with his beloved fruits and flowers, and continued to be a reformer of the first order, championing temperance and the right of women to vote. He also warned repeatedly of the dangers of monopolistic banks and businesses, while supporting a host of progressive notions.<sup>88</sup>

It must have been with some gratification, then, that F. K learned two years after losing his Bloomington Nursery of the troubles of Follett and Tuttle, the two New York City financiers who loaned him money and then forced him out. The *New York Times* headline for September 26, 1882 read: "Alonzo Follett's Failure; The Note Broker Drags Down Another Large Firm."<sup>89</sup> The next day the headline was equally sensational: "Pulled Down By Follett; John S. Tuttle Makes An Assignment Without Preferences,"<sup>90</sup> In a final twist to the story, Fred S. Phoenix, who had stayed with his father's firm after bankruptcy, soon acquired partial ownership of the Bloomington Nursery, and successfully managed it for many years before retiring.

Perhaps the legacy of F. K. Phoenix can best be expressed by the reporter who visited the huge Bloomington Nursery at its zenith, in 1870:

*After observing the man, even from a distance, it is not difficult to give a good reason for his great success. Coat and hat off, sleeves rolled up, an unmistakable firmness and earnestness of manner show to the most casual observer a man not only able and willing to triumph over circumstances, but one faithful and powerful enough to make circumstances.*<sup>91</sup>

## Gifts to the Prairie: The Work of Pioneer Nurserymen and the Art of the Prestele Family



William Henry Prestele prints produced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Left: *Blackberry*. Right: *Raspberry*.

William Henry Prestele continued his printing business until 1887, when he was offered the job of a lifetime. The U. S. Department of Agriculture was opening a new Pomology Division and hired William Henry to be their first artist. From then until his death in 1895 (and despite being in considerable discomfort from his old Civil War wound), he created some of the most accurate and realistic artwork ever, particularly of native grapes.<sup>92</sup> One cannot help but

think that his father would have been proud of this accomplishment.

There seems little doubt that both William Henry Prestele and F. K. Phoenix added immeasurably to the appreciation of art and nature in the lives of those around them. In the process of giving art and nature to the prairies both men found and served their God in a most beneficial way.



VIBURNUM *Opulus*  
Snow Ball.



THE NORTHERN SPY APPLE.



THE GREEN GAGE PLUM or (REINE CLAUDE)

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- 40 *General Descriptive Catalogue of Fruit and Ornamental Trees, Shrubs, Roses, Bulbs, Herbaceous and Garden Plants, Cultivated and for Sale at The Bloomington Nursery*, 1880, p. 2; Box 1, Phoenix Nursery Catalogs, Phoenix Collection. Although F. K. had left the Bloomington Nursery two years before, his son Fred continued to work for the firm and compiled this catalog using articles written by his father for earlier catalogs.
- 41 William Cullen Bryant, *Letters of a Traveller* (New York: George P. Putnam, 1850), pp. 262-263.

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42 *Horticulturists III* (April, 1849), p. 462.

43 Bio compiled for the *Yearbook of the Illinois State Horticultural Society* (1925?), Box 1, Franklin Kelsey Phoenix, Phoenix Collection.

44 Advertisement in the *Daily Pantagraph*, March 17, 1858, p. 3, col. 3.

45 "To Farmers and Tree Planters," *Daily Pantagraph*, March 15, 1858, p. 3, Col. 2.

46 Ibid, p. 3, col. 3.

47 "To Farmers and Tree Planters," *Daily Pantagraph*, March 16, 1858, p. 2, col. 3.

48 "Pioneer Nurseryman," *Pantagraph*, July 15, 1899, p. 3, col. 2.

49 Watson, pp. 204-207.

50 Advertisement in the *Daily Pantagraph*, May, 19, 1862, p. 1, col. 2.

51 *Rural Annual and Horticultural Directory for the Year 1858* (Rochester: Joseph Harris, 1858), p. 108.

52 "Planting and Care of Trees," *General Descriptive Catalogue of... the Bloomington Nursery*, 1880, p. 7.

53 Ibid.

54 Mary Louise Rice, *The Role of the Osage Orange Hedge in the Occupation of the Great Plains*, Master's Thesis, University of Illinois, 1937, p. 17.

55 Joseph A. Caldwell, *Caldwell's Treatise on Hedging*, (Columbus: Segners and Condit, 1870), p. 12.

56 U. S. Commissioner of Agriculture, *Report, 1868-69* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1869), p. 247.

57 *Pantagraph*, May 19, 1862, p. 1, col. 4.

58 "The Bloomington Nursery," *Weekly Pantagraph*, March 30, 1870, p. 1, col. 1.

59 *Wholesale Price List of the Bloomington Nursery... Spring of 1867*, p. 13, Phoenix Nursery Catalogs, Phoenix Collection.

60 Watson, *Shade and Ornamental Trees...*, p. 215.

61 *Wholesale Price List of the Bloomington Nursery... Spring, 1859*, p. 23.

62 Earl W. Hayter, *The Troubled Farmer: 1850-1900*, (DeKalb: Northern IL University Press, 1968), pp. 167-168.

63 *Daily Pantagraph*, March 16, 1858, p. 2, col. 1.

64 From "Andreas' History of the State of Nebraska," Otoe Co. Part 17, [http://www.rootsweb.com/~neresour/andreas/otoe/otoe\\_p17.html](http://www.rootsweb.com/~neresour/andreas/otoe/otoe_p17.html); retrieved 10.02.2007.

65 *Daily Pantagraph*, May 19, 1862, p. 1, col. 4.

66 Ibid., May 17, 1862, p. 3, col. 1.

67 Letter from Fred Phoenix to his grandmother Mary (January 3,1869), Box 1, Fred Stanley Phoenix, Phoenix Collection.

68 *Daily Pantagraph*, July 15, 1899, p. 3, col. 2.

69 Letterhead dated January 28, 1867, Misc. Correspondence, Box 1, Phoenix Collection.

70 Ibid.

71 *American Agriculturist*, Vol. XXVII No. 5 (May, 1868), p. 187.

72 See van Ravenswaay, pp. 77-81.

73 "The Bloomington Nursery," *Weekly Pantagraph*, March 30, 1870, p. 1, col. 2.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid. "A Pioneer Nurseryman," December 15, 1900, p. 3, col. 3.

76 See van Ravenswaay, pp. 103-107; Ken Henson, Biographical Information, pp. 9-10.

77 Harper's Weekly (September 4, 1869), page 575.

78 As quoted in van Ravenswaay, p. 106.

79 *Weekly Pantagraph*, March 30, 1870, p. 1, col. 2.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid., p. 2, col. 2.

82 van Ravenswaay, p. 106.

83 Ibid., p. 105

84 Des Moines Art Center, *Fruits & Flowers Carefully Drawn from Nature*, p. 11.

85 van Ravenswaay, p. 104-105.

86 Ibid., pp. 107-109.

87 *Daily Pantagraph*, November 8, 1877, p. 4. col. 4.

88 "Pioneer Citizen Hears Death's Summons," *Delavan Republican*, February 9, 1911, Franklin Kelsey Phoenix, Box 1, Phoenix Collection.

89 *The New York Times*, September 26, 1882, p. 8.

90 Ibid., September 27, 1882, p. 8.

91 "The Bloomington Nursery," *Weekly Pantagraph*, March 30, 1870, p. 1, col. 2.

92 van Ravenswaay, pp. 110-112 and Ken Henson, Biographical Information.

## Source of Color Plate Captions

### Cover Plate

1 Alexander Apple: *Initially much praised by the nurseries, the Alexander soon fell into disfavor: "This Russian apple, so much admired for its size and beauty, is not a favorite in the orchard ... fruit falls badly from the tree."*<sup>1</sup> (p. 510)

Figures 1-6

iv Jonathan Apple: *First described by Judge Buell of Kingston, NY, the Jonathan apple became (and remains) an old favorite, still grown widely in the country today. Downing called it "a very beautiful dessert apple" with "great beauty, good flavor, and productivity in all soils."*<sup>2</sup> (pp. 232-233) Warder agreed, calling it, simply, "a gentleman's apple."<sup>1</sup> (p. 679)

v Gladiolus Flower: *"The flowers are arranged on long spikes, and are very richly colored, and gorgeously marked and blotched." In addition, they required "no care whatever after being planted."*<sup>3</sup> (p. 47.)

vi Beurre Superfin Pear: *A fine pear originating in France in 1838: "Skin yellow, slightly shaded with crimson on the sunny side, and partially covered with russet, and thickly sprinkled with minute dots."*<sup>2</sup> (p. 699)

18 Viburnum Opulus, Snowball Bush: *Popular since colonial times, the snowball bush was said by landscape designer Frank J. Scott to be "so showy when in bloom that few even of townspeople are unfamiliar with it."*<sup>4</sup> (p. 365)

19 Northern Spy Apple: *Downing loved the Northern Spy, which originated near Rochester, NY, the nursery capital of the world in the 1850s. "This beautiful American fruit is one of the most delicious, fragrant, and sprightly of all late dessert apples." He added that it "always commands the highest market price."*<sup>2</sup> (pp. 289-290)

20 Green Gage Plum: *This plum originated in France, where it was known as the Reine Claude. "The Green Gage is universally admitted to hold the first rank in flavor among all Plums, and is everywhere highly esteemed."*<sup>2</sup> (pp. 917-918)

<sup>1</sup> John A. Warder, *American Pomology*, 1867

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Jackson Downing, *The Fruits and Fruit-Trees of America*, 1869

<sup>3</sup> *Nursery Catalog of Miller & Hunt Florists*, Chicago, Ill., 1883

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Breck in Ann Leighton's, *American Gardens of the Nineteenth Century*, 1987

## Source of Illustration Captions

### Page 2 (left to right)

a Bartlet Pear

b Ben Davis Apple: *Considered one of the best varieties for the commercial market, the Ben Davis was described by one contributor ... as follows: "...a sure bearer, the best keeper and brings more money than any other....When all others are gone [from the market], late in the spring and summer, the Ben Davis graces the shop windows... evidence of its keeping powers..."* *Transactions of the Illinois State Horticultural Society for 1874* (New Series, Vol. VIII), Chicago: IL State Horticultural Society, 1875, p. 287

c Brandywine Pear: *"Found on the farm of Eli Harvey, on the banks of the Brandywine, Delaware Co., Pa. Tree vigorous, upright, uniformly productive."*<sup>2</sup> (p. 767)

### Page 3 (left to right)

a Crawford's Late Peach: *Downing, one of America's premier arbiters of horticultural taste, called the Crawford "one of the most magnificent American Peaches." He went on: "We think it deserving of universal cultivation. As a splendid market fruit it is unrivalled, and its size and beauty will give it a place in every garden."*<sup>2</sup> (p. 605)

b Coe's Golden Drop Plum: *An English variety, somewhat tender, but with fruit of the largest size, with a... "flavor rich, sweet, and delicious."*<sup>2</sup>

c Duane's Purple Plum: *"Skin reddish purple in the sun, but a very pale red in the shade, sparingly dotted with yellow specks, and covered with lilac bloom."*<sup>2</sup> (p. 910)

### Page 4 (left to right)

a Duchess D'Angouleme Pear: *"A magnificent large dessert Pear, sometimes weighing a pound and a quarter, named in honor of the Duchess of Angouleme..."*<sup>2</sup> (p. 747)

b Bailey Sweet Apple: *Originating in Western New York, the Bailey Sweet Apple was thought "profitable for all purposes, although perhaps a little too tender...for shipping long distances."*<sup>2</sup> (p. 84)

c Glout Morceau Pear: *"This is cultivated in France under the name Beurre d' Aremburg. The tree is hardy, and a constant bearer, requiring good cultivation..."*<sup>5</sup> (Sept., 1846, p. 272.)

### Page 5 (left to right)

a Dutch Mignonne Apple: *A Dutch apple known as Reinette Doree in Europe. Fine large yellowish-golden fruit was thought good for the kitchen, market and drying.*<sup>1</sup> (p. 593)

b Crown Bob, Whitesmith Gooseberries: *The Whitesmith was noted for its large fruit and excellent flavor. "This fruit is...in high estimation for pies, tarts, and puddings, coming into use earlier than any other."*<sup>2</sup> A writer ... called the Crown Bob and Whitesmith "the best English gooseberries for this country" but cautioned about their "liability to mildew after bearing one or two crops."

c Golden Reinette Apple: *"A very popular dessert fruit in England and on the Continent, combining beauty and high flavor."*<sup>2</sup> (p. 195)

### Page 6 (left to right)

a Isabella Grape: *Few grapes were more popular in the mid-nineteenth century than the Isabella. Originating in South Carolina, it was brought north about 1818 by Mrs. Isabella Gibbs, after whom it was named. "Its great vigor, hardiness, and productiveness, with the least possible care, have caused it to be most widely disseminated."*<sup>2</sup> (pp. 542-545)

b Jefferson Plum: *"Fruits of Superior Excellence" - "Mr. Downing speaks highly of this fruit....It is of large size, hangs long on the tree without rotting or being attacked by wasps."*<sup>5</sup> (Sept., 1846, p. 272.) "...the most desirable and beautiful of all dessert Plums....of unusual size and beauty. ...very rich, juicy, luscious, and high-flavored."

c The Isabella Grape - Dr. Grant, a leading authority on the grapes of the day described the Isabella as... "New... large, black, early." *Catalogue of the Bloomington Nursery*, 1880 Dr. Grant asked his readers: "...for what family is there that is not interested in good grapes, such as all have heard of, but few have known? And in wine, too, that is able to aid the sick and invigorate the weak?"<sup>8</sup> 1868

### Page 7 (left to right)

a Jersey Sweet Apple: *"A very popular apple in the Middle States, where it is not only highly valued for the dessert, but, owing to its saccharine quality, it is also planted largely for the fattening of swine."*<sup>2</sup>

b Knight's Early Black Cherry: *"A most admirable early Cherry," reported Downing, with "flesh light yellow, quite firm, rich, juicy, sweet, and very high flavored."*<sup>2</sup> (p. 467)

c Red Astrachan Apple: *A popular cooking apple with Russian heritage. "Perfectly adopted by our countrymen, and a great favorite... Fruit medium to large, regular, oblate; surface smooth, mottled, marbled and striped crimson on greenish-yellow; dots minute, heavy bloom."*<sup>1</sup> "A fruit of extraordinary beauty... Its singular richness of color is heightened by an exquisite bloom on the surface of the fruit, like that of the plum."<sup>2</sup>

Page 8 (left to right)

a Louise Bonne de Jersey Pear: "Fruit large, oblong pyriform, a little one-sided, glossy, pale green in the shade, but overspread with brownish red in the sun, and dotted with numerous gray dots."<sup>2</sup> (p. 805)

b Lawrence's Favorite Plum: Downing called this plum of "high merit" forming an upright tree of "thrifty growth" with fruit "most delicious."<sup>2</sup> (p. 928)

c Newtown Spitzenburg Apple: *Originating on Long Island, Downing said of the Newtown Spitzenburg: "...most excellent fruit, which is suited to more tastes than any other Apple of its season."*<sup>1</sup> (p. 286)

Page 9 (left to right)

a Beurre Clairgeau Pear: *A popular French pear. "Flesh yellowish, buttery, juicy, somewhat granular, with a sugary, perfumed, vinous flavor."*<sup>2</sup>

b Downing's Everbearing Mulberry: "An estimable variety, and surpassed by none except the Black English, and possesses the same rich sub acid flavor."<sup>2</sup>

c Peck's Pleasant and White Bellflower Apples: Downing called Peck's Pleasant "a first-rate fruit in all respects" with the fruit exhibiting a "beautiful clear yellow [color], with bright blush on the sunny side." The Bellflower was also highly respected. Good for either baking or the table, it had a creamy, yellow fruit with a fine-grained juicy flesh.

Page 10 (left to right)

a Rambo Apple

b Red Canada Apple: *The Red Canada actually originated in New England. Considered a table apple, its flesh was described as "yellowish-white, breaking, crisp, fine-grained, tender, juicy."*<sup>1</sup> (P. 542)

c Rienette Canada Apple: *According to Downing, this variety originated in Europe where it was "popular and highly esteemed," and wherever grown in America, had "sustained its foreign reputation." "Flesh, breaking, fine grained, very juicy."*<sup>1</sup>

Page 11 (left to right)

a Rome Beauty Apple: *Still a favorite for many today, the Rome Beauty originated in southern Ohio. It was considered by the 1860s to be a good market apple "on account of its productiveness, size and beauty, as well as for its certain bearing."*<sup>1</sup> (pp. 458-459)

b Deutzia Canescens - Syringo-Leaved Deutzia: *Another new shrub of foreign origins, initially highly acclaimed. F. K. Phoenix was able to grow large numbers of such shrubs for 25 to 35 cents each, putting them in range of most buyers. His advertisements frequently admonished: "Bloom and beauty for the eye and our better nature."* Pantagraph (May 19, 1862)

c Sterling Pear: *Originated in Livingston County, New York; grown from seed brought from Connecticut. "Skin yellow, sometimes with a few small patches of russet, and on the sunny side a mottle crimson cheek."*<sup>2</sup> (p. 859)

Page 12 (left to right)

a Summer Hagloe Apple: *The Hagloe was considered a fine apple: "Excellent for cooking, highly esteemed by market gardeners of New Jersey, where it is much grown."*<sup>1</sup> (p. 596)

b Deutzia Scabra - Rough leaved Deutzia: *Most of America's ornamental Deutzia shrubs have been grown for their floral displays. But their popularity in the mid-1800s had much to do with their being newly imported from China, as anything from China or Japan in the nineteenth century was instantly fashionable. As one prominent nurseryman of the period said: "Anything from England or Scotland, is very fine; whatever comes from Austria is a little better; from northern Asia, or from China, or Japan, it is superb..."*<sup>8</sup> (September, 1858, p. 272)

c Swaar Apple: *The Swaar, like so many early varieties, was shrouded in confusion, both as to name, origin and characteristics. Warder, one of the most knowledgeable authorities of the day, reported in frustration: "[It is] like many others of our Western fruits, which have been received from various sources, and often from unreliable persons, and with wrong names.<sup>1</sup> (pp. 572-573) Thought to have originated with the early Dutch settlers along the Hudson, Swaar is Dutch for "heavy", referring to the great size and weight of the fruit.<sup>2</sup> (p. 373)*

Page 13 (left to right)

a Tradescant's Black Heart Cherry: *A European variety found growing in the garden of an inn in Maryland. It attracted the attention of William Prince, a nurseryman, who propagated it in large numbers under the name Elkhorn.<sup>2</sup> (p. 474)*

b Swan's Orange Pear: "...we consider it one of the most remarkable American varieties yet produced...standing as high...as any pear yet known." *The Magazine of Horticulture, 1848* (C. M. Hovey, ed., (Vol. XIV, 1848), Boston: Hovey and Co., 1848, p. 531)

c Trollop's Victoria Strawberry: *An English variety: "Flesh light scarlet, tender, juicy, sweet, rich, with a somewhat peculiar aromatic flavor."<sup>2</sup> (p.104) "...a very fine, large variety—sometimes considerably productive, but oftener rather sparingly so."<sup>6</sup> (1863, p. 42)*

Page 14 (left to right)

a Golden Russet Apple: "This delicious table apple is a universal favorite with all who can appreciate delicacy of flavor and fineness of flesh...[but] the fruit is very apt to be imperfect."<sup>1</sup> (pp. 521-522)

b Rebecca Grape: *Originating in Hudson, New York, Downing described the Rebecca Grape simply as a "nice amateur Grape" that "succeeds finely in some localities."*<sup>2</sup> (p. 533)

c Pomme Grise Apple: *A dessert apple described as one of the "very best of the Russents" with a delicious, rich, aromatic flavor.*<sup>1</sup> (pp. 469-470)

Page 15 (left to right)

a White Winter Pippin Apple: *Of unknown origin, the White Pippin was described as "remarkably thrifty, vigorous and productive" by Warder, who described the leaves as "quite downy beneath, and deep green above."<sup>1</sup> (p. 648)*

b White French Guigne Cherry: *Fruit described as small, but "flesh tender, juicy, sweet, pleasant."*<sup>2</sup> (p. 476)

c Virgalieu or White Doyenne Pear: *The White Doyenne is, unquestionably, one of the most perfect of autumn Pears. Its universal popularity is attested by the great number of names by which it is known..." This pear originated in France, having been cultivated for over two hundred years.<sup>2</sup> (pp. 880-881)*

Page 16 (left to right)

a Daphne Mezereum: "Flowers come out before the leaves... Blossoms will perfume the air to a considerable distance."<sup>4</sup>

b White Grape Currant: "Berries very large, whitish yellow, sweet and good. Very productive."<sup>2</sup> (p. 492)

c Crown Imperial Flower: *Fritillaria imperialis was a "favourite of the old Dutch fl. painters."* Roy Hay and Patrick M. Syng, *The Color Dictionary of Flowers and Plants for Home and Garden*, New York: Crown Publishers, 1969, p. 299) *It was also a favorite of wealthy colonial gardeners.*

Page 17 (left to right)

a Dahlia Flower: "The most magnificent and showy of autumn flowers, growing two to four feet high, and producing a profusion of large, double flowers of rich and varied colors."<sup>3</sup> (p. 37); Authority Joseph Breck cautioned in the 1850s that this immensely popular flower from Mexico may have become too much of a "new flower of fancied merit," and simply "all the rage for the time being."<sup>4</sup> (p. 317)

b Viburnum Lantana - Wayfaring Tree: *A native of Europe and Asia, the Wayfaring shrub was transported to America in colonial times. Planted mostly for its fruit, which turns from green to blue to black as it matures, newer Viburnums with better flower displays became more popular.*

c Tulip: *For centuries the tulip had been a favorite in Europe; Americans were equally fond of this traditional favorite: "These truly magnificent flowers deserve all admiration."*<sup>7</sup> (1888, p. 18.)

<sup>1</sup> John A. Warder, *American Pomology*, 1867

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Jackson Downing, *The Fruits and Fruit-Trees of America*, 1869

<sup>3</sup> *Nursery Catalog of Miller & Hunt Florists*, Chicago, Ill., 1883

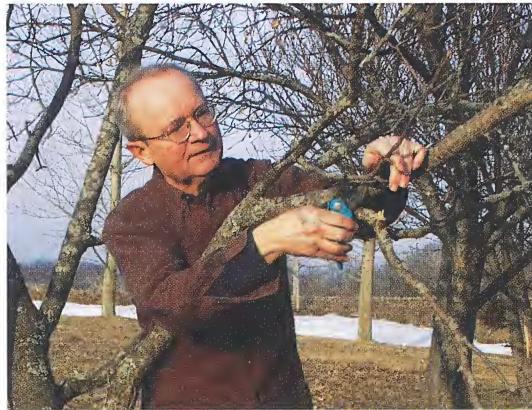
<sup>4</sup> Joseph Breck in Ann Leighton's, *American Gardens of the Nineteenth Century*, 1987

<sup>5</sup> *Prairie Farmer* - September, 1846

<sup>6</sup> *Rural Affairs*, 1863

<sup>7</sup> *Capital City Nurseries Descriptive Catalogue of Fruit and Ornamental Trees*, 1888

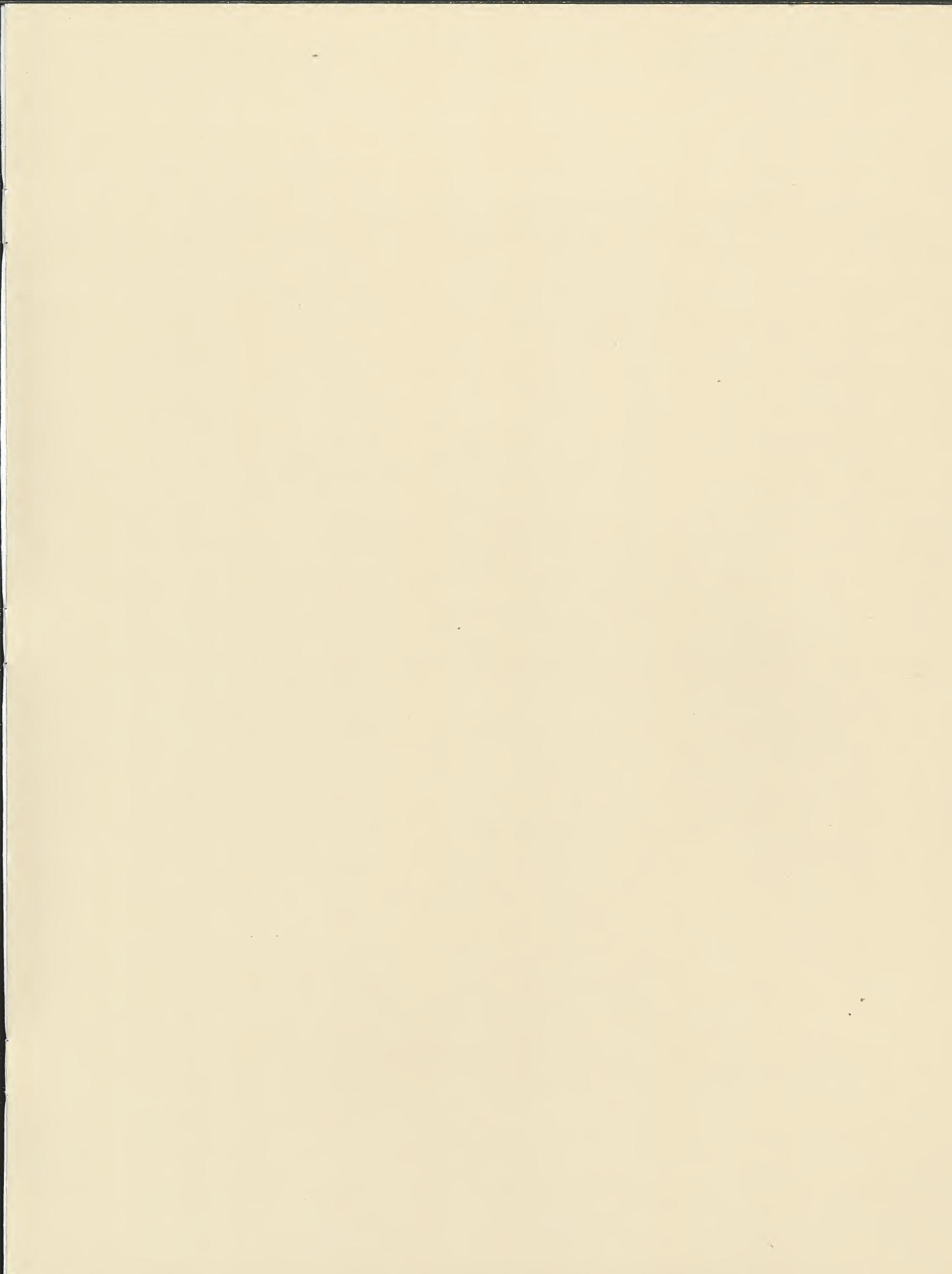
<sup>8</sup> *American Agriculturist*, September, 1858



### *About the Author*

Daryl Watson was born and raised in Galena, Illinois, where he continues to pursue his dual interests in history and geography. He earned a Ph.D. in geography at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and is recognized as an expert in Victorian landscapes. Watson's research on nineteenth-century tree planting and the role of nurserymen in the northeastern United States has provided new understanding of the connection between the nursery business and the work of the Prestele family.

Watson is the former city administrator for the historic community of Galena, and was the executive director of the Galena/Jo Daviess County Historical Society and Museum for 18 years. He currently teaches history and geography courses for Highland Community College, and is a member of the Jo Daviess County Greenways and Trails Planning Committee. His publications include *The Roots of Your Landscape — A Guide to Evaluating and Researching Vintage Landscapes around Historic Properties* (1993), and *Dooryard Gardens in Early Illinois: A Guide to Historic Landscape Restoration* (1984).





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